

no mercy

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Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Hunger Games Setting , Blood and Gore , Suicide Attempt , Enemies to Lovers , nothing about this is realistic i apologize in advance , this is purely self indulgent you guys can come along for the ride i suppose , well maybe enemies to lovers is a bit fake , they're supposed to be enemies dream just sucks at being mean to george , Real Names , sapnap exists for like 2 seconds
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by [glitterfox19](#)

Summary

Statistically, it made sense that it was his name on the paper that had been pulled. He was eighteen, after all, so that was already seven entries. Add on the tesserae for himself, his mother, his father, and his two younger brothers, and that added an extra twenty-eight entries. Thirty-five slips of paper with George Davidson written on them. It was simple math.

George hated statistics.

Notes

hey, it's that same anon. thought i wouldn't write again, so i orphaned all my works (which is why i haven't been responding to comments posted on [on the color orange](#) or [the waves](#), which are my other works). look who came crawling back.

i wrote this to scratch an itch in my brain. forgive any parts that don't totally make sense or anything that feels rushed.

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Statistically, it made sense that it was his name on the paper that had been pulled. He was eighteen, after all, so that was already seven entries. Add on the tesserae for himself, his mother, his father, and his two younger brothers, and that added an extra twenty-eight entries. Thirty-five slips of paper with George Davidson written on them. It was simple math.

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The escort—what was her name again? Zora? Zebra?—leaned forward, her purple lips smacking together as she speaks. “For our boys... George Davidson!” She said his name as though it were something to celebrate, tossing her head with glee. Her bow, the same color as her makeup, her hair, and the rest of her outfit, bounced about, coming dangerously close to falling off her hair. George pictured it flying off, carried away by the wind. Ridiculous. Everything about this situation was ridiculous.

There were about five seconds of total silence after the words left her mouth. Even the wind fell silent for those moments. He was thankful. It allowed him to breathe in deeply for what was probably the last time ever. Savor the moment before he was carted off like cattle to the slaughterhouse. He opened his mouth. The choking smog from the factories flooded his senses. Would the air taste different in the Capitol? In the arena?

Nobody clapped. He tried to pick out his family from the crowd, but he couldn’t make out any distinct features of anyone. Only blank faces peering back at him, hundreds of clones of ashen-faced kids. All thinking the same thing: Better him than me.

“Come on, George! Step up here!” The kids his age had all stepped away from him like he had been tainted the moment his name passed the escort’s lips. He moved forward jerkily, his limbs falling into place without input from his brain. Almost like his body was being tugged along by a conveyor belt. George stumbled as he climbed the stairs to the stage.

He stared blankly ahead as Zora—he was certain that was her name now, it sounded just goofy enough to be a Capitol name—picked the female tribute.

“Emily O’Sullivan!” She was skinnier than a twig, her hair long and thin. She looked to be no older than thirteen. Her body was entirely composed of sharp angles and lines. He could probably lift her with only one hand and barely break a sweat. She stood no chance. Then again, neither did he.

Zora grabbed his hand and raised it high above her head. She had lipstick on her teeth. “Your District Three tributes for the Sixty-Eighth Hunger Games!”

George mustered a smile. There were cameras on him. There were going to be cameras on him for the rest of his life, whether he wanted them or not, whether he lived or not. Maybe there would be a camera in his grave. Making sure he wouldn’t come back up.

Zora kissed the two of them on the cheeks in what seemed to be some bizarre Capitol ritual. “You two are adorable. I could eat you right up.” Judging from how plump she was, George didn’t doubt this in the slightest. He shook his head, trying to dispel the urge to crack a joke.

The mentor for District Three tributes was off to the side, sitting on the edge of the stage. He'd hardly acknowledged any of the proceedings. He was whistling to himself, messing with his pink hair that refused to stay flat. His name was Techno. He'd achieved celebrity status for his performance in the Games and had maintained it by keeping a steady flow of Capitol girlfriends. He had the whole aloof, tough-guy look going on. George didn't see it—he'd always preferred people with softer features, both on the inside and the outside—but maybe Capitol women found it enticing. Who knew.

George was only a toddler when Techno had won his Games at sixteen years old, but when he was older, he'd heard kids discussing how he had the record for most tributes killed. He'd seen clips of his deeds. Watched limbs and debris fly into the air, covering the cameras with dust and innards.

He closed his eyes and pressed down on his eyelids with his thumbs, forcing the images out of his mind. It had worked when he was a kid, seated in front of the television for the first time, watching kids not much older than him pummel each other to death. It continued to work like a charm.

Peacekeepers swooped in, grabbed them both by the shoulders, and frog-marched them in the direction of the train station. Zora followed, chattering inanely the whole way. It was easy to tune her out; he didn't understand half of what she was saying.

George stole a final glance of the District as the Peacekeeper opened the door. The smog hovering above the factory that made the clouds permanently tinged gray. The factory itself, looming in the distance. The crowds, starting to disperse. Most of them didn't dare look in his direction, as though sneaking a glance of the tributes would seal their later fate. Some stared openly with wonder. They were the ones too young to understand. They would learn soon enough.

"Move it, kid." He did as the Peacekeeper said. Eventually, you had to lose your awe. It was either choked out of you by yourself or by someone else. And it was always best to do it yourself. Less painful that way. You can almost convince yourself that it was your idea all along. Better to have no hope, George thought. It keeps his expectations well-managed.

He was ushered into a private room with no windows. It was all-white. It made his pale skin glow in a sickly way. A single Peacekeeper stood guard by the door, his hands relaxed at his sides. George looked at his hands, stretching out each digit individually and looking at the folds, the cracks, the hairs.

Were these hands capable of killing to survive? He wasn't sure. He could picture them building tools, bringing water to his mouth, tinkering with electronics, tearing apart meat cooked over the fire. He couldn't see them wielding a knife and burying it in someone else's chest. Or firing a slingshot into someone's eye. Or bashing someone's skull in with a brick.

He pressed down on his eyes, hard, but it didn't work as well as it had in the past. Great.

There was a beep. The door opened. His mother entered first, a hand covering her mouth to try to contain a gasp that George had already heard. He stood up and she threw her arms around him, her face buried in his shoulder. She silently wept. George patted her head and watched as his father and two younger brothers stepped into the room. He wished he could cry. It would be freeing.

Once everyone was inside, the Peacekeeper gruffly informed them, "You've got three minutes." His father put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed. When George turned to look at him, his father had his eyes trained on a point on the wall. A tear formed in the corner of his eye and slowly dripped down his cheek. George watched its journey surreptitiously. He had never seen his father cry before.

His mother finally relaxed her iron grip, if barely. “You have a good head on your shoulders, George,” she said. Her hand trembled as she brushed back some of his hair behind his ear. She didn’t tell him to win. It wasn’t painful that she didn’t believe in his capabilities. What capabilities did he even have that were relevant? Even if he had any chance of survival, his odds were nothing compared to the Careers. Telling him to win would give him hope. And he has no time, no space, no energy for that. It does not belong here.

His father grabbed him by the shoulders and tapped his chin. “Keep your head high in there. Don’t...” He cast a furtive glance over his shoulder at the bored-looking Peacekeeper, who was stifling a yawn. George narrowed his eyes. How could he be so indifferent at a time like this? Did he have no compassion? Was he simply numb, as George was now? Had he seen this same scene play out year after year after year? Each time, a child saying goodbye for the final time? Was it background music to him? “Don’t let them get to you. Keep your dignity.”

“I will.” That was something he could afford to promise.

He knelt to embrace his younger brothers. Both were too small to be reaped. Both were too naive to understand. They knew that he wouldn’t come back if he lost. But they didn’t know that the events that played out on the screen were real. That if he died in the Games, he really had been killed in that gruesome way. They thought the Games were an elaborate movie production put on for everyone in the Districts. That the deaths were faked and the tributes lived in the Capitol happily ever after. They thought it was the Capitol’s way of giving back. Selfishly, George was glad that he wouldn’t have to witness his parents shatter their innocence. “Win for us, George!” Jack pleaded, clapping his hands.

George smiled. “I’ll try.”

“We have a present for you,” Ben added, rummaging around in his pockets.

Eventually, he retrieved a thin, metal circle. He proudly brandished it. It was perfectly smooth. George turned it over. A threaded wire was bunched at the back. “It’s a necklace!”

“A battery necklace,” George said, his throat tightening. “Thank you.” He turned it over and over again in his hands, relishing the way the cool metal feels on his skin. It was the standard battery that they used for most electronics in District Three, for everything from computers to bombs to whatever fancy whirring thing the citizens of the Capitol wanted on a certain day. They had the most eccentric wants. Most of the time, George didn’t even understand the purpose of some of the devices that were exported. They seemed pointless. Easily broken. Easily replaced.

Each member of his family gave him one final hug before leaving him alone with the Peacekeeper. They didn’t say ‘I love you.’ George wasn’t sure if it would have made a difference if they had. He knew he was loved. He knew it was too hard to say. He knew too much.

The door clicked shut. Would it have felt more climatic if it had slammed? A cathartic release? A finality?

He untangled the wire and put the necklace on, tucking the battery underneath his shirt. It settled right over his heart.

*

The train ride was... awkward.

Emily spent the entire time staring out the window, refusing to do much of anything. Instead, she

chewed on the skin next to her fingernails. For a second, she had looked in George's direction, and he had seen her bloodshot eyes.

He picked at some of the bread. It was thick and fluffy, so different from the flat squares made with the dense, ration flour he'd grown up with. If only he were hungry.

"You two are my third set of tributes," Techno informed them, leaning back in his seat. "So. What am I working with?" In his mentor's eyes, they were objects to be tinkered with, not people who were pawns in a cruel game meant to humiliate the Districts. It's hard to escape from the engineering mentality, George knew this very well, but his mentor's words made his blood boil.

"I'm pretty good with electronics. Y'know, wiring and stuff," George offered. Techno snorted derisively and rolled his eyes.

"Obviously. Give me something unexpected." George narrowed his eyes. He was starting to dislike Techno.

Zora made a disapproving clucking sound with her tongue. Today, her theme was all-pink. Her outfit was pretty similar to the one she sported yesterday except for the shade difference. Even her afro was colored pink. Capitol fashion made no sense. "Techno, play nice."

"I'm a decent runner," Emily said in a small voice. "I can get away."

Techno nodded. "Okay. That can be useful. George? Anything else?"

"I can handle an ax pretty well." Every year, their family scraped together enough savings to buy a turkey. They'd kill it and make a stew from all of its parts. Once George turned eleven, his father taught him how to handle the ax properly. It wasn't a fond memory. But it was a useful one. "Probably not better than a Career, but it's a start."

"A start," Techno echoed. He stared down George before nodding once to himself. "Okay. Yeah. We can try to figure something out. Won't be the easiest thing, but hey, I'm a miracle worker." And then he had the audacity to smirk. The string of anger that had been coalescing in George's chest tightened and then snapped.

"What do you even do?" George spat out. "I mean, I get you're important, whatever, but does your entitlement come from somewhere? Or are you just an asshole?"

Techno let out a low whistle. Zora covered her mouth with a manicured hand. Emily cringed away from him after his outburst, her eyes wide. George wished he had swallowed back the words when he had the chance. "I'm sorry. I'm a bit overwhelmed—"

"No, please, keep telling me what you really think." Techno quirked an eyebrow. When George didn't respond, his cheeks burning, his mentor continued. "Let's see. I help you form alliances. I make sure you get sponsorships and I send you gifts when you're in the arena—that is, if I think you deserve them. I'm your lifeline. I wouldn't go around trying to sever it so early on."

Bile rose in George's throat. He'd gotten frustrated and blew his chances at survival. "No, I mean it, I am sorry, it's—"

"But I respect you for having the balls to yell at me. That's some nerve, kid." Wait, what? He was so distracted by Techno that being called 'kid' didn't even register for him. His mentor wasn't going to give up on him? "I think our chances of a win for District Three aren't as bad as I'd thought."

Well.

Nothing about that conversation went as expected.

Chapter End Notes

update from 8/23: changed original mentor's name to techno because i wanted to put technoblade in it lmao

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

here, have a chunky chapter.

His chariot outfit was profoundly stupid. That was not an exaggeration. George was wearing some close-fitting silvery tunic that clung to his torso and legs. It was covered in concentric circles meant to represent the interlocking of gears. Around his neck were layers of overlapping bike chains.

Juko, his stylist, flitted about him like a nervous bird unsure of where to land. She touched all over his face and body with light, quick touches. “Oh, Skelly did such a wonderful job with the makeup,” she cooed, tilting his face from side to side. George didn’t want to look at his face. He was certain that there were at least two pounds of makeup coating his features. He probably looked unrecognizable.

“We just need the headdress...” Her words trailed off as she grabbed something out of sight. He felt a weight settling on his head. Juko manipulated his hair so it would cover his forehead without falling too far into his eyes. “And! There! It! Is!” Each word was punctuated with a little clap. “Check it out!”

He glanced up from his lap into the mirror. He didn’t look like a total idiot as he expected. The outfit made him look... well, terrifying. His jawline had been accentuated with dark gray tones to make it look knife-sharp. The silver powder underneath his eyes made his eyes look piercing instead of dull. The headdress was a crown, but it was made out of scrap metal instead of gold or silver. It looked like it could be used as a weapon.

“Woah,” he breathed. He reached to touch his face, almost not believing that the reflection in the mirror belonged to him. Juko swatted his hand down.

“Don’t you dare touch that makeup!” she screeched. George resisted the urge to roll his eyes. Capitol citizens were so dramatic. “You’ve got to look nice for the cameras, darling!”

Right. The chariot. George felt himself start sweating. Juko probably wouldn’t like that. Thankfully (or maybe not thankfully, George wasn’t quite sure yet), Techno appeared in the doorway, ready to whisk him away for more bizarre ritual preparations. Maybe the Capitol was a cult. He couldn’t rule out that theory.

As they walked to the chariots, Techno whistled a tune George didn’t recognize. “Where’s Emily?”

“She’s already there, with some of the stylists. She looks great. So do you. Remember to smile and wave. You want the citizens to fall in love with you.”

George snorted. “Yeah, you’re delusional if you think that’ll happen.”

Techno fixed him with a stern look. “They will as long as you don’t look surly. Come on, don’t be modest. Surely girls your age were lining up around the block to go out with you.”

“I wouldn’t know. I never paid attention to girls.”

“Okay, fine. I bet the guys were lining up, too.” Techno threw his hands up in the air. “It doesn’t matter. You’ll win over the hearts of all genders if you smile.”

“I didn’t say I was interested in guys—” They rounded a corner, and George cut himself off. Emily was wearing a similar outfit, except hers was cut as a dress instead of a shirt and pants. The silver material billowed out behind her into a floor-length gown. Her crown was identical to his own. She didn’t react to his arrival. Her eyes were glazed over, fixed on a random point on the wall.

Juko stepped out from behind them to add some finishing touches to Emily’s makeup. George’s heart was in his throat. Millions of eyes would be on him momentarily.

He zoned out for a moment, and then Techno was leading them to their chariot, and they were stepping up, and Zora was waving at them with a handkerchief, and their whole team was reminding him to smile, and then the horses took off.

He did as he was told, smiling and waving at the Capitol citizens who were lining the streets to watch them go by. Was his family watching? What were they thinking? Jack and Ben were making fun of his outfit. The thought made his smile more genuine. The faces in the crowd all blurred together. People were throwing flowers and other trinkets onto the street and their chariots. A flower landed at his feet. He wasn’t quite sure what it was, but it was pretty, so he held it up and waved.

“Blow them a kiss,” Emily muttered under her breath.

“What?”

“That’ll make them love you,” she said through her teeth. “Do it now, idiot.” Was she trying to win? Or did she think that George’s odds were so much better that she wasn’t trying at all? That didn’t feel right. Nothing about any of this felt right in the slightest. But now was not the time to think about it. It was never the time to think about any of this.

He blew a kiss in the direction that the flower came from. The crowd went wild.

His cheeks were starting to hurt from grinning, but he knew he couldn’t stop. George’s eyes flicked up to the television screens and found his reflection staring back. He didn’t look half-bad. His smile looked endearing instead of too large for his face. Maybe Techno and Juko and everyone else had a point.

The screen flashed and cut to another chariot. The girl was wearing an enchanting dress that shimmered like fish scales. She wore a headpiece made out of brightly-colored seashells. It must have been District Four, with all the fishing-related gear. The boy was wearing a blue tunic with a cape that made him look like he was surrounded by crashing waves. But his face was covered. He was wearing a white mask with a simple, black smiley face on it. It was unnerving. A bizarre stylistic choice, that’s for sure. George found himself unable to look away.

He finally tore his gaze away during their final lap. He put extra effort into waving as to combat his ever-growing urge to look behind him at the District Four boy. Envy flared in his gut. It would be so nice to be able to hide his face.

The chariots finally slowed to a stop not too long after. George was fairly certain that his cheeks were about to collapse inwards from the strain. Emily gave him a curt nod before stepping off the chariot. He wondered what was going through her head and concluded that it would be a mystery he might never untangle.

All twenty-four of the tributes were led inside a massive building. They were lectured about training starting the next morning at ten, reminded that they were not allowed to fight each other before the Games started, and were bade goodnight. Once George had settled into his room, which was almost as large as his house back in District Three, there was a sharp rap at the door.

Techno was on the other side. "Some advice. Don't use the axes tomorrow. Maybe once or twice as a warm-up, but don't show your actual skill. You need something to present to the Gamemakers. Spend some time with the survival stuff. That'll be what saves your life. It doesn't matter if you can ax someone in the chest if you're foaming at the mouth because you picked the wrong berries."

"Anything else?" Techno was brilliant, if irritating. There was something about how bored his tone was that could be really grating.

"I think it might be worth it for you to make some alliances. With someone who isn't Emily. I hope you two stick together, at least. I'll figure that out, don't worry. It would be nice to get you in with the Careers, but that might be too much of a stretch."

George curled his lip, picturing the brutish characters he'd seen from the reaping. "I'm not sure—"

"That's what I thought. But I wanted to double-check. Try to get some sleep."

Somehow, George had no issues with doing so. One moment, his head was on the pillow, and the next, he was wide awake, the sunlight streaming in through the window. An outfit had been neatly folded at the end of his bed. It was composed of tight-fitting leggings and a muscle t-shirt. He dressed quickly, unsure of how much time he had.

It accentuated his skinny frame in a way he hated, so he didn't dwell too long in front of the mirror. He pinned the accompanying badge that displayed his district number before heading to the elevator. He figured that being early wouldn't be a bad thing.

He wasn't the only one with that idea. Emily was already waiting for the elevator. They exchanged nods, not entirely sure of what to say to each other.

"I hate this uniform," she said eventually, picking at the shirt. It seemed like it was cutting off the blood supply to her arm. "It's too tight. It makes me look like a limp dick."

George's laugh was resounding, bouncing off of the glass walls. It was so powerful that he had to put his hands on his knees. Emily raised an eyebrow. "Was it that funny? I can say it again if you want. Limp dick."

"It wasn't just funny. It was hysterical." She turned away, but not before George saw a ghost of a smile tugging at her lips.

They arrived on the second floor where the gymnasium was and discovered that they weren't the only district who was eagerly anticipating the training. The Careers were all there, talking and jeering amongst themselves. George found himself trying to pick out the District Four boy, but he wasn't quite sure what he looked like. It was hard to see from the reaping, and his face wasn't shown during the chariot ride. Obviously.

A towering boy with dirty-blond hair wrinkled his nose and glanced away from his compatriots only to make direct eye contact with George. They both blinked at each other before the boy gave a small wave. George found himself returning the gesture.

The trainer talked at them for fifteen minutes saying what they had already been told last night

before letting them loose. The Careers made a bee-line for the most dangerous weapons. The District Two girl grabbed a bow and immediately shot a bulls-eye. Another Career girl—George thought she might have been District One—had a knife between her teeth and two more between her fingers, already aiming for the next target.

The boy who had waved picked up a sword, weighing it in his hands. “Clay! Come on, spar me!” another Career yelled, already holding a shield. Clay raised his eyebrows before shaking his head. The other boy looked like he was fixing for an argument when the trainer intervened and repeated the rules in a bored tone.

“I’m going to the snares section,” he told Emily. She gave him a thumbs-up.

“Want to meet at the food identification in thirty minutes? I feel like it’ll be good to do that in pairs.” George nodded and they parted ways.

The snares section, unexpectedly, felt like coming home. It was exactly like working with the blueprints in the factory. The trainer would give him directions and he’d manipulate the ropes and other objects into elaborate traps that could send someone flying or neatly grab a rabbit from the forest floor. It wasn’t the same as manipulating machinery, but it was similar enough. He was certain that it would be his favorite station.

Some of the knots were unfamiliar, and he was struggling with a rather complicated one when he felt someone’s presence looming over his shoulder. George looked up and found himself again looking into the bright eyes of Clay.

“Are you from District Four?” he blurted. The other boy nodded, a small smile overtaking his face. “Sorry. I wasn’t sure. You’re Clay, right? I’m George.”

“Nice to meet you, George.” Clay jutted his chin out in the direction of the rope that was entangled in George’s hands. “D’you need help? Are you trying to do a reef knot?”

“They have names? I was just looking at the pictures.” Clay chuckled. George felt the bottom of his stomach sink a little lower. It wasn’t an unpleasant feeling. Strange, sure, not something he was used to, but not a terrible one. It wasn’t quite dread. He couldn’t quite place it.

“Mind if I take over for a second?” George passed the rope along, ignoring the zing of electricity that spiked up his arms when their fingers brushed. He was being ridiculous. Over-cautious. He needed to calm down; Clay wasn’t going to kill him in the Training Center. He’d be stopped before he could even bruise him. George hoped so, at least.

“Here.” Clay presented George with a perfect replica of the knot in the book.

“You’re a genius,” George said, marveling at the handiwork. Clay blushed. It made the freckles on his nose more obvious.

“Hey, you’re not bad yourself. You’re doing pretty well for someone who doesn’t know what a reef knot is.” George opened his mouth, ready to defend himself when he noticed that Clay’s shoulders were shaking with poorly contained laughter. He shoved the other boy (gently, of course, not wanting anyone to think that he meant harm against another tribute) and got back to work.

They worked in comfortable silence side-by-side. The trainer was impressed by the progress they were making and challenged them to race each other to see who could make a certain trap the fastest. George won by a hair, mostly because Clay had mixed up the order of two steps.

“So you’re both brains and beauty,” Clay teased. George ducked his face, hating the blush that he

knew was spreading quickly.

“Speak for yourself. I’m not sure how you got your stylist to cover up that face of yours. Surely they’d want to show it off.”

Clay shrugged, his cheeks dusted pink. “My features weren’t up to Capitol snuff, I imagine.” George felt his mouth drop open. If the other boy wasn’t Capitol snuff, then George definitely shouldn’t have been allowed to show his face at all. Clay snickered. “I’m kidding. They wanted me to go with a certain angle. I don’t get it entirely, but whatever works, I guess.”

“I wish I could’ve done that.”

“Don’t say that. I’m glad they didn’t cover your face. You made a lot of people swoon in that crowd.”

George’s cheeks reddened. He tried to focus on the figure-eight knot, but his thumb kept fumbling with the rope. “Pfft, as if.”

“Trust me. If I could have, I would have thrown you a rose.” Was that flirting? It wasn’t, right? George’s head was swimming.

Someone cleared their throat from behind them. George looked up, feeling like he was a kid getting caught out after curfew, and found Emily staring down at him with a single eyebrow raised. She gave off disappointed mother energy while being four years younger than he was. Impressive.

George scrambled to his feet. “I’m going to go... see you around.” Clay echoed his sentiment, clearly focused on a particularly difficult section of a trap.

“Is this a strategy that I didn’t know about?” Emily muttered under her breath. It would sound bitter if not for the tiny grin she wore. George spluttered for a moment before regaining his cool. He had been so flustered around Clay, but now that there was distance between them, he could think clearly.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I’m pretty sure you’re supposed to make the Capitol citizens fall for you. Not other tributes.”

“He wasn’t... that’s hardly...” George took a deep breath. “What?”

Emily shrugged. “He was flirting with you.”

“Probably to get me off my game. I don’t know. I won’t let it happen again.”

“You enjoyed it.”

"No, I didn't!"

“Sure.” Emily looked like she wanted to say something else, but the woman in charge of the edible food identification section was eagerly waving at them, excited to have her first tributes of the day, and the moment was lost. They spent about two hours reading through guides and naming certain types of plants.

“I know so much more about mushrooms than I ever thought I’d need to know,” Emily said through a mouthful of stew. They were allowed an hour for a lunch break. George made a face, thinking about how he kept misidentifying a particular hallucinatory mushroom with a similar,

edible one. They looked practically identical.

"I'm worried that I'm going to mix up the colors of two plants and eat the toxic one," George confessed. Emily fixed him with a look as she slurped from her spoon. She managed to look intimidating even with a spoon in her mouth.

"You'll be fine. There are other ways to identify them besides color, you know."

"Oh, I know. The lady said that about ten times." They laughed and tucked into the food. George was particularly fond of the roast duck. He didn't even know that was something one could eat, but it was plentiful here, knife-tender, and slathered with gravy. He scooped up the meat onto the bread he adored and scarfed it down, not caring about his table manners. Emily wouldn't judge him and he didn't care about what the other tributes thought.

Okay, he'd made sure Clay wasn't looking in his direction when he started wolfing down his food. But that wasn't because he had been flirting earlier, or whatever Emily had been talking about earlier. How preposterous would that be? Two tributes entering a relationship before being forced to either bear witness to someone else killing their lover or wield the weapon themselves? He'd have to be insane to want to do that. Talk about a love of pain.

After lunch, George moved onto the first-aid station as Emily conquered the ropes course. She was nimble and speedy, so she stood a chance in that she could get away from the Cornucopia and stay well-hidden. George admired how she leaped fearlessly from rope to rope as though it was second nature.

Clay joined him once more and listened to the lecture about which plants had healing properties and how to properly tie a bandage. They practiced tying tourniquets on each other as the station trainer observed.

"Why aren't you with the Careers?" George asked as Clay adjusted the bandage around his elbow.

Clay shrugged. "I've spent enough time with them already. Not exactly... the wittiest crew. Rather spend time with someone with a good head on their shoulders." George's eyes went wide hearing his mother's words in this stranger's mouth. "Speaking of, I should probably go find someone like that instead of hanging around you."

"Hey!" And they've only known each other for half a day, and they're supposed to be enemies, but the male tribute from District Four is making him laugh so hard that his sides are hurting. He can't be all that bad. George tried to push out the nagging thought about how eventually, one of them (if not both of them) will die. It was hard to conceptualize that standing in the gymnasium and laughing like they were old friends.

It was a nice routine to have. Eating rich, luxurious meals three times a day, tying ropes with Clay, handling weapons with Emily. If only they could stay here in this stasis period instead of being shipped off to the Games. Too bad all good things must come to an end.

On the third day, George woke up before the sun rose, his sheets twisted around his body and trapping him. He'd had a nightmare that he could no longer remember, but the cold feeling of dread remained, wrapping around his shoulders like an awful scarf. He stared out the window and watched as the sky lightened.

Today was the day where he'd show the Gamemakers what he could do. He'd discussed his plan with Techno the night before; throw an ax or two and make the beginnings of a bomb from the device that they used as an educational tool for the edible food station. It would be boring, but

Techno said he was pretty sure that would net him a decent score, and that's all George could ask for.

The day passed by in a blur, and then he was in the waiting room. He was lucky that they went in the order of the Districts; he wasn't sure how he would handle waiting until the end, the way District Twelve had to.

Emily was on his right, and next to her was Clay. She pretended to be irritated with how they leaned around her to chat, but her eye-rolls weren't convincing enough. George had spent enough time with her to know when she was being sarcastic.

He was called. Emily and Clay both wished him good luck. When he opened the door, he heard them speaking quietly to each other. It made him feel calmer, for whatever reason. Maybe he could have Clay as an ally inside the arena.

Of all the stupid things to think about when his life was on the line.

The Gamemakers waved at him. There were seven of them sitting behind a high table loaded with food, but most of them seemed more focused on him than the feast. Good. That was to his benefit, at least.

He moved to the weapons station and grabbed the ax he'd practiced with before. It was well-balanced, light in his hands. George held it with one hand lined himself up with the target. It sailed through the air and landed just off of the bulls-eye. Not bad.

After throwing the ax three more times, he moved to the electronics station. His hands flew as he constructed the skeleton of what could become a bomb if he had the proper ammunition. He held it up and explained how this could be manipulated to detonate on impact.

"You're dismissed, George," the Head Gamemaker said. As he left, he saw the group huddle up to confer amongst themselves.

Techno was waiting for him on the other side. George mentioned the Gamemakers' reaction.

"That sounds like a good response, then. They think you're a contender."

Emily came through about fifteen minutes later, her cheeks flushed. George knew he wasn't supposed to ask what she'd done, but he secretly hoped she'd shown off how fast she was. Something to set her apart. But not too far apart so people would single her out.

That evening, after dinner, they settled in to watch the scores recap. Each tribute had their photo projected with their score underneath so sponsors would know who was worth betting on. Though scores didn't mean everything. People with high scores were more likely to be targeted, whereas people could disguise talents and get a low score to throw off the competition.

The District One guy netted a ten. So did the other girl from his district. The District Two female also got a ten, while her male counterpart got an eight.

Emily scored a five. "I'm impressed I even managed to get that high," she muttered. George bounced his leg. He wasn't sure what number he wanted to receive. Or which one he was expecting. George blinked at the screen, not believing the bright number seven that had flashed before him even when his picture faded away. There was no way he did that well.

When he focused again, Clay's score was just starting to fade out. Ten. Naturally.

After that, George stopped concentrating so much on the scores, only glancing up when Techno had a particularly interesting remark. The District Six girl got a two. Techno raised his eyebrows. "Strange. That's low."

The District Eleven girl got an eight. "That's unexpected. Watch out for her, I guess."

George swallowed. The number of high scores made him on edge. Sure, there were a lot of people in the middle of the pack, but the Careers on their own were terrifying enough. He didn't want too many other serious contenders.

He brushed his teeth and tried not to think about Clay's sweet comments from earlier. He was manipulating him, twisting George around his finger, trying to get him to trust the big, strong Career who would gut him easily. George closed his eyes and pictured leaning in, their lips nearly touching, only for the District Four boy to slash him across the throat and leave him to bleed out.

That night, he had nightmares of a man in a mask gutting him while laughing as though they were still sharing jokes back in the Training Center.

George decided not to talk to Clay anymore after that.

Chapter 3

The buzzer for the girl from District Two sounded, and Caesar Flickermann was gesturing for him to return to the stage. George wiped his sweaty hands on his silver suit—a nice choice from Juko because he could keep his battery in his pocket and touch it when he got too nervous—and walked over to his seat.

“So, George. What do you think about the Hunger Games so far?” The crowd was so packed that it looked more akin to a can of sardines than a group of people. Very bizarrely colored sardines. Did they even eat sardines in the Capitol? What was the question again?

George shrugged before remembering he needed to have a competent answer so that he’d have a fighting chance. “The citizens are very charming. Brightly colored, too. It’s neat.” He closed his mouth so fast that he nearly chomped his tongue off and rendered himself an accidental Avox. He could practically hear Techno groaning. Way to go, idiot.

The crowd didn’t recoil at his stupid response the way he thought they would. Some of them made a cooing sound as though he were a particularly adorable pet. “I’m sure you haven’t seen fashion like this in District Three, am I right?”

“Oh, for sure. When my stylist gave me my first outfit, I thought she was out of her mind. And then I realized that I’d be underdressed at some Capitol events.” People laughed. George fought to keep his rising confusion off of his face. That wasn’t meant to be funny.

The interview felt like easy banter. Caesar had a way of making his poorly thought-out answers sound interesting, humorous, likable, even. As they talked, George gained more confidence, both with his speaking ability and his chances with the Games.

“What do you have to say to potential sponsors in the crowd? What should they know about you?” The three minutes were nearly up. This was his chance.

“Strength isn’t everything in the arena. Without brains to back it up, you’ll just get stuck in sticky situations. I’m a good decision-maker who can wield a weapon or two. I have a feeling that quick thinking will save my skin more than a shield ever could.”

The buzzer sounded and he was met with uproarious applause. He waved goodbye to the crowd as he walked back to his seat. “Good luck,” he whispered to Emily. He reached over to squeeze her hand. “You’ve got this. Caesar’s an idiot.” She rose and smirked before forcing herself to blank her face.

The adrenaline pumping throughout his body made it hard for him to focus on her interview, but he collected himself enough to catch a line towards the end that gave him pause.

Caesar had asked her if she was nervous. She said, “Yes, and no. I know what’s going to happen, which is obviously anxiety-inducing. But at the same time, I’m glad I have George with me. I feel like I can really count on him.”

George blinked and then smiled for the cameras that he knew were focusing on him for a close-up at that moment. As he did so, he tried to pick apart his swirling thoughts. Why would she say that? They’d had nice interactions in the Training Center, sure, but that seemed to be surface-level. Maybe it had meant more to her than he thought? No, Emily was guarded, but she spoke her mind. Perhaps this was a ploy? But why? It reflected well on him.

He was still reeling when Clay took the stage. He looked like a total Career even from the way he was sitting, legs splayed wide, one arm hooked around the back of his seat. Casual. Lazy. Like it was beneath him. George scowled slightly at the display of arrogance before schooling himself. It was an act, just like his banter with Caesar, just like Emily's strange declaration.

His natural interview was nothing compared to the rapport that Clay had with Caesar. They chatted like they were best friends. They moved through pleasantries before alternating between exchanging quips and discussing the competition. Eventually, they began discussing the chariot ride into the Capitol. "Why the mask, Clay?"

"Wasn't sure if the citizens of the Capitol could handle my good looks," he said, winking to the crowd. They ate that up. He chuckled and held up his hands. "Just kidding. I feel like it's more of a metaphor for how I'll approach the games."

"Oh? How so?"

Clay grinned, leaning back in his chair. "That would be ruining all the fun if I spelled it out, don't you think?"

George found himself admiring the way he kept the conversation going, his arrogant act bleeding through in just the right way to make him seem confident rather than cocky. He bit down on his lip, trying to dispel these thoughts. He wasn't associating with District Four anymore.

The rest of the interviews flit by quickly. The girl from District Six hardly spoke a word during her interview. She shook like a leaf. Hardly strong competition. George doubted that she had a strategy to look weak; it seemed incredibly genuine, given her stature and persona.

The girl from Eleven was very tall and skinny. Her interview didn't shine any light on how she managed to get her score. Oh, well. It would become apparent in the arena. Sooner or later, at least.

The rest of the interviews went in through one ear and out the other. He was still trembling from the excitement when the final buzzer sounded and Caesar bade the ground goodnight. Emily nudged him with a shoulder as they walked back to the Training Center with their team.

"What's up?" He shook his head, not knowing how to express what he was feeling. It wasn't just the adrenaline from public speaking. It probably compounded with his anxiety for the Games. In less than twelve hours, he'd be trapped in the arena, and twenty-three people would die. Statistically, he was likely to be one of them.

Emily didn't press him. She gave him a solid pat on the back.

They talked in front of the television for a while until the prep team and Techno realized that neither Emily nor George had very much to say. Emily was chewing on her fingernails again, except they were so raw that she had to move onto her cuticles. Behind them, the odds of tributes were displayed. It was the last night of betting before the arena. The exchange of money became frantic at around this time.

The only odds he saw were his own and Clay's. 10 to 1 and 3 to 1 respectively. He had to turn away after that. Too strong of a visual reminder of how he'd never be able to be friends with the boy from District Four.

He couldn't sleep. Of course not. It was impossible to shake the reality of what was going to happen tomorrow morning. Would he die in the bloodbath? Hopefully not, but it seemed

inevitable. The Careers would seize the weapons and mow him down before he even left his plate. Maybe Clay would be the one to deliver the killing blow.

In the early hours of the morning, he made a valiant attempt at getting maybe an hour of rest, but a nightmare forced him awake. Snatches of the images plagued him for the rest of the night. Heavy breathing down his neck, a sword jabbed between his shoulder blades, Clay yelling in a sing-song tone, "Oh, George! I'm gonna get you!"

George forced himself to eat a proper breakfast. It would be his final meal for... well, forever, most likely. That thought made his stomach sink even lower. This must be how those who were executed by firing squad felt. Except this would be worse because his death would be both unpredictable and broadcasted on live television from his entire family to witness.

Techno had some final words for him before the hovercraft took off. "Take care in there. Watch out for Emily, alright?" George nodded. Tears started to clog his throat, but he swallowed them before they could make his eyes shine.

The hovercraft ride was even more silent than the train ride to the Capitol. No one even dared to breathe too loudly. It was only about ten minutes until the windows were blacked out. They must be close by.

George felt like a zombie as he clambered off the hovercraft and into his bunker of sorts. They injected him with a tracker as he waited on the ladder. He tore off bits and pieces of a muffin, chewed on some fruit, tried to choke down bits of meat so he'd have staying power. The food made his stomach turn, so he focused on drinking water instead. Who knew if he'd even have a clean source of that in the arena. Dying of dehydration was almost worse than getting stabbed to death. At least the second option would be over quickly. Joko tried to hold a conversation, but that proved impossible, so she settled for chatting about fashion trends. It was numbing. Thankfully.

One minute, he was climbing on the ladder. The next, he was on his plate rising into the arena. So this is it. This is where he'd die.

He stood facing the Cornucopia. It was at the center of a circle of sand. About a hundred feet away, the desert gave way to dirt and a thick cluster of mushrooms of all sorts of shades and shapes. They were so dense that it was hard to see in.

The gong sounded. George sprinted forward. It was a risk, but he knew without supplies he'd be done for. He had only taken a few paces forward when Emily reached the horn. She grabbed a medium-sized brown backpack and chucked it at him, her expression unreadable. She waved at him before turning to face a Career who had just nabbed a deadly-looking spear.

He was powerless as he watched Emily get skewered before him. He reached out to grab her, but George felt like he was stuck. His body refused to face the danger. He needed to get out of here. He ran as fast as his legs would carry him. No one followed.

George reached the edge of the desert in no time. The mushroom forest would be enchanting if it weren't in the middle of a death arena. A strange, lumbering animal that resembled a cow had mushrooms growing from its back. There would be food, at least. He needed to put as much distance between himself and the Cornucopia as possible. And then he needed to find water.

After alternating between running and walking for about an hour, he stopped beneath a very tall mushroom to check what supplies he had. Inside his pack was a dagger, a packet of crackers, some dried fruit, an empty bottle, a sleeping bag, some rope, and a water purifying agent. Not a bad haul.

"Thanks, Emily," he said, re-packing the items. His brain short-circuited when he tried to formulate an explanation for her behavior. Why she wanted him to live so badly that she sacrificed herself. What if there was no point? What if he had died minutes later to the Bloodbath? What was she thinking?

George could picture her rolling her eyes at him. "You don't need to question every little thing, dingus. Sometimes, things don't happen for a reason."

He scaled one of the mushrooms, curious to see the surrounding area. They were awkward to climb, but he dug his hands in and managed eventually. When he reached the top, his hand grabbed liquid instead of the weirdly-fleshy material of the mushroom. George glanced over the side.

This mushroom had a shallow pool of water on top. He grinned. Brilliant. The Gamemakers were making this too easy for him. He had all the resources he needed. Once he figured out which mushrooms were edible, there was a chance he'd be okay.

He spent the rest of the daylight foraging for mushrooms on the ground. About three hours after the beginning of the Games, there was the sound of a cannon. And then another one. And then another one. The deaths seemed to be endless. He counted ten in all.

The one downside to the arena was that being on top of mushrooms meant that you could see anyone. Which meant they could see you. On the ground, the terrain didn't have the same kind of visibility. He decided to camp on the ground, only venturing up when he needed to refill his bottles.

At midnight, George wrapped his sleeping bag around himself and stared up at the sky. The anthem played, just like it always had on the television. And then the faces were projected into the sky. Emily's was the very first. It stung to look at it, but he forced himself to memorize her features. He still didn't understand why she had done what she did. Next was the girl from District Five. The male from District Six. The girl from District Seven. Both from District Eight. The girl from District Ten. And both from District Twelve. Fourteen competitors left. Clay was left. And the rest of the Careers.

He fell asleep without meaning to and woke to the sound of a branch snapping.

Instantly, he was on his feet, stuffing the sleeping bag into his backpack. By the time his attacker got within range, he was scampering away, eyes on the tall mushroom that he'd climbed once before.

George risked a look over his shoulder. It wasn't a pack. A single guy with an ax. The District Five kid. He was carrying it awkwardly like he wasn't used to the weight. No matter. George made it to the top unscathed.

Stupidly, he'd assumed that the kid would give up and find someone else to chase. Easier prey. Instead, he made it to the top of the mushroom in record time. George didn't have time to react when Five shoved him, sending him flat on his stomach.

George flipped over onto his side and dug his fingers into the squishy flesh of the mushroom. The District Five tribute advanced, holding the ax with one hand. His gait was awkward, a bit bow-legged. He held it up, but he'd clearly underestimated the weight of the head of the weapon, as it tipped forward and fell from his hands, burying itself in the plant instead of George's chest.

George seized his opportunity and kicked out. The boy stumbled backward before throwing his arms out and recovering. He scowled and grabbed George's leg, pulling him closer. As he was

dragged, George stabilized himself with his arms and used the momentum to launch himself to his feet. The other tribute reared back, surprised, and that was his fatal mistake. George drove his shoulder into the other boy's chest and pushed him with all his might.

He screamed as he fell, his hands outstretched as though George might change his mind and save him. There was a crunch when he landed on the ground. George hesitated, waiting for the sound of the cannon. When it didn't come, he ran to the side of the mushroom and climbed down.

The other boy was alive, his face twisted with pain. His mouth was moving, but George couldn't focus on the words. His attention was on the way the boy's legs were bent at unnatural angles. One leg was pinned underneath his back, the other out to the side, turned in a way that had to be painful.

"Please."

"What?"

"Kill me."

George shuddered at the words. He took two steps back before realizing he had. "What?" he repeated, shaking his head. He can't. He can't. He can't.

"You can and you have to. Please. I can't have them find me. I don't..." His words devolved into sobs. He started to chant. "Kill me. Kill me. Kill me."

"I..." George trailed off. The ax was still on the mushroom. All he had was his dagger. Would that finish the other boy off more quickly? "One second." He got a running head start and leaped onto the side of the mushroom, his hands sinking in. He made it to the top quickly, retrieved the ax, and was back on the ground less than a minute later.

The boy cringed away, but he nodded. George felt the crackers in his stomach begin to make a reappearance, but he swallowed them back down. "Good. Thank you. Thank you."

This was sick. The ax weighed so much more than it seemed to. Like the ground was pulling it in. "Are you sure?" George knew the answer, but he needed to hear it. Needed to know that this was the right thing to do. That he wasn't acting of his own accord. He was doing what needed to be done. Showing mercy.

"Please," the kid begged, and he was a kid, barely a teenager, blood trickling down his lips. George raised the ax above his head. "Thank you. Tell my family I love them. Thank you."

The boy wasn't in front of him any longer. It was a turkey, a grungy looking thing that was supposed to be plump but was always on the skinny side. His stomach gnawed painfully, eagerly awaiting the taste of fresh meat. The chill nipped at his bare fingers, his nose, and then the ax was ripping through the boy's neck. The turkey's neck. They were one and the same. Neither existed.

The boom of the cannon rattled his teeth. It rearranged every cell in his body, told them to spin in a different direction. His head swam.

George fell to his knees. Everything was heavy now. But he had to keep going. He needed to survive. He flipped the boy over and gingerly removed the backpack, apologizing as he did so.

You're a killer.

I did what had to be done, he reminded himself as he sorted through the items. Half of a packet of

crackers. A loaf of bread wrapped in paper. Some twine. Matches. A spool of wire, the thick, copper kind. George marveled at it, unfurling about a foot's worth. This could be useful.

"I see a body!" George snapped to attention. He got to his feet and took off at a sprint. "We've got a runner!"

George cursed under his breath. The two backpacks plus the ax were more cumbersome than he thought. He wished he had a way to strap the ax across his back to free up his movements. Maybe he could beg Techno for that in the evening.

Assuming he lived that long.

He heard crunching from behind him. He risked a look over his shoulder. About two hundred feet away was the group of Careers, eagerly chasing him down. One was making incredible strides away from the rest of the group; he was only about fifty feet away and gaining quickly. Taller than the rest, with a sword in his hand... Clay.

He was doomed. George felt himself slow, almost anticipating the way the sword would feel once it was buried in his back. The other tribute's death was for nothing. A senseless killing, considering how he would be dead in minutes.

His legs were swept out from underneath him and he went sprawling. Clay grabbed him by the collar roughly and hoisted him up. "This one's mine!" Clay yelled to the group. George let his head loll, let the fight evaporate from his body. There was no point. Clay scored a ten in training. He'd probably eviscerate him. His family would receive scraps. Maybe a finger.

The Careers hang back, jeering amongst themselves. One of the girls called out encouragement to Clay. Clay marched him forward, his fingers clamped down tightly on his shirt. George's eyes kept slipping shut.

There was a flash of green and Clay dropped him with a shout. Dazed, he lay there for a moment, his brain unable to keep up with the new development. He was so tired. He'd been in here for so long already. He wanted to get his death over with.

Another flash of green sent him scrambling to his feet. Whatever that was moved inhumanly fast. It wasn't another tribute. A third was waiting in the trees. The Careers were yelling amongst themselves. George focused on Clay, who was still within arm's reach, his sword outstretched and pointed towards one of the muttations, which was crawling towards them rapidly.

It opened its mouth, shuddered, and then exploded into pieces. Something hit George in the back. He took that as his cue to start running away, ignoring the searing pain.

That shouldn't have happened, George surmised. There was no reason to send the muttations out. The Capitol was about to be given a show from his death. Whoever screwed that up just died. He was certain of it. One of the Gamemakers was on his way to execution.

There was a high-pitched scream and then an explosion. George couldn't tell if the cannon sounded; it was drowned out by the sounds of the beasts. He kept running. He wasn't sure if Clay was still beside him. Or behind him, hunting him down. He could smell the stench of death everywhere.

One of the muttations blocked his path. It was massive, taller than any man, neon green, and scaly, its shoulders hunched over. It had no eyes; it must track its prey through scent or sound. It unhinged its jaw to reveal a glowing explosive. George slowly moved back behind a mushroom,

hoping beyond all hope that maybe it would deactivate. Or not notice him.

It sniffed the air, its mouth hanging open, before relaxing its shoulders and closing its mouth. At the exact same time, Clay buried his sword in its back. It screamed once before collapsing. The other tribute scanned the surroundings before taking off in the opposite direction, away from George, away from the Careers.

Once George finally convinced himself it was safe, he stepped out from behind the mushroom. The lizard-mutation-thing lay dead in the clearing, its eyes blank. George hesitated, but he had a theory about something he could do. Carefully, slowly, he pried open the jaws of the beast. Every muscle in his body screamed at him to leave, to get away from the danger.

He separated the jaws to reveal the explosive, which was embedded in the opening to the lizard's throat. He pulled out the dagger from his backpack and hoped that it would be delicate enough to the job. Leaning as far forward as his body would allow him, George angled the dagger and cut around the bomb. The sharp teeth pricked the skin of his forearms, but he was too focused to care. Sweat beaded on his temples. One wrong move and this would all be for nothing. He'd be peeled off the ground.

After nearly an hour, he'd cut around the bomb sufficiently. He wasn't 100% sure that it deactivated when the creatures died, but he had no other choice. George reached in and closed his fingers around the explosive. Gently, he pulled upwards. It went into his hands without a fuss.

He turned it over. It looked like the standard District Three bomb. The ones that he'd made for years and shipped off to the Capitol, never really asking questions as to what they were going to be used for, not knowing that perhaps his creation would end up in his hands. The light that showed activation was dim.

George shoved it into his backpack and ran back to his home mushroom by the stream. For the first time since the Games started, he felt like he had some control over what was about to happen. That he could start playing the Games on his terms instead of the Careers'.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Finding the Careers was simple. Fixing the bomb was easy. Figuring out what to do next was the hard part.

He fiddled with the machine, careful to avoid the major switch, as he observed the Careers. It was mid-afternoon on their fourth day of the Games. No one was doing much of anything; it was blisteringly hot. The Careers only lost one member to the mutts, the District One guy. George had a hard time feeling sorry for him. The only other recent death was the District Eleven boy. There hadn't been a skirmish to his knowledge. Maybe he'd died of dehydration or something else. Who knew?

They were predictable with their camp. Right in the middle of the Cornucopia. They had enough supplies to make a feast. They didn't even need to venture out to the mushrooms, even though they were a mere hundred feet away at most.

George had some half-formed plans in his head, but none of them made any sense. Since they were out in the open, there was no way that he could sneak up on them without whoever was on watch alerting the group. He could try risking that, but there was a chance that the bomb would jam, or that he'd be too close to the blast radius and take himself out along with all of the main competition. And he wanted to get through this alive.

He decided to wait until nightfall. The Careers didn't prove to be interesting to people-watch. Except for Clay. George felt like his eyes were magnetically attracted to the boy from District Four. He would take walks around the perimeter of the camp, singing to himself, occasionally dancing along to his tune. It was endearing.

No, not endearing. Arrogant. Frustrating. Stupid. George scowled. It was hard to see him as the bad guy.

Sunset fell. The Careers had an established watch schedule. Clay had first watch. George swallowed. That would make this much, much harder. He wriggled himself out of his hiding spot. Darkness would conceal most of his movement, anyway.

What he didn't consider was that the Careers were able to see in the dark. Clay put on a pair of night-vision sunglasses. He cast his gaze about before his eyes landed on George.

Fuck. George froze. He was done for. Clay would eviscerate him and that would be it. They'd use his bomb against innocent people and then he'd be the indirect cause of their deaths, too.

Except Clay didn't react the way George thought he would. He didn't immediately rouse his allies or go after him with a weapon. Instead, he waved.

George waved back and then, against his better judgment, beckoned him closer. Clay stared at him for a moment before shrugging and obeying.

With shaking fingers, George showed him the bomb. He mimed chucking it and then an explosion with his fingers. Clay nodded and held up a finger as if to suggest 'Give me one minute.' George watched as he ran to the compound, nabbed a backpack and his trusty sword, and then returned, sitting right next to him.

"I feel like we should team up," he whispered. "We keep helping each other."

George nodded. "The moment I throw this, let's get the fuck out of here."

"Roger."

The bomb sailed through the air and landed just on the edge of the camp. Clay was on his feet in an instant, tugging on George's arm. "Go, go, go! C'mon!"

The explosion sent them both tumbling back to the ground. George winced at the pain blossoming from his ankle. Clay seemed relatively unscathed, as he was on the move again moments later. When George struggled to get to his feet, Clay scooped him up as though he weighed less than a toddler and carried him through the mushroom forest.

"Clay, we should stop for the night. I don't think they're following us."

Clay nodded and helped him set up his sleeping bag. They were settling into sleep when the anthem played. District One girl. All of District Two. District Four girl. All gone. It was too painful to celebrate, but George cracked a grin at the thought of how much closer to home he was.

After the bomb, they entered a strange routine.

One of them would keep watch and inform the other about the nightly deaths. They'd gather resources together. They'd tease and bicker and joke around. They spent every single minute together without worrying for a second about receiving a knife in the back. Well, from the other member of the alliance, at least.

That shouldn't have been enough for what followed. But somehow, it was. It was the blueprint for something much messier. Something too complicated, too risky, too stupid for the Games.

George would notice Clay staring sometimes. Staring at him. And he made these comments, too, like George was special. Beautiful. Worthy. And that was dangerous. That was scarier than anything the Gamemakers could throw at them. Or the other tributes remaining.

Because George felt it, too. He loved the freckles on Clay's face. The way his muscles twitched when he used his sword. His boisterous laughter, his silly tendencies, his jokes that border on a bit too much.

The moment George realized things had gone too far was on the second day of their alliance. They'd been hunting and foraging for food. Clay had almost accidentally eaten a poisonous mushroom and George had barely batted the thing out of his hand in time. Pieces were beginning to click together. It would have been so easy to let the boy from District Four die from a stupid mushroom. He wouldn't even be blamed for it. But George couldn't bear it.

George had wandered off in search of more edible plants when someone descended from above and nearly took out Clay. The boy from District Nine, armed with a pretty lethal mace. Clay was putting up a fight, but Nine had the upper hand.

Another moment where it would have been so easy to let Clay die. And George had pulled out his dagger and stabbed the other boy in the back. Nine had turned on him, but Clay slit his throat before any harm could be done.

The boy from District Four, golden in the sun, bloody and bruised, clutched his side awkwardly. "I think he broke some of my ribs."

“When you make it to the Capitol, they’ll fix you right up.”

When those words left his mouth, George realized what had happened. He’d stopped trying to win the Games for himself. He cared so deeply for this boy from another district that George didn’t want to win anymore. He wanted Clay to win instead. It was clear; he loved this strange boy that he’d met preparing for this hellscape. What were the odds of that?

It came as no surprise when Clay eventually said, “I love you.” About a week had passed since the gong sounded for the very first time. For anyone else, that would be far too fast. But they were running out of time as it was. They needed to take advantage of fleeting moments.

George swallowed and dipped his head. “There are cameras,” he said hesitantly. Clay continued to stare at their makeshift roof, a mushroom top.

“What would you say if there weren’t cameras? Pretend like they’re not there.”

“I wouldn’t... say anything.”

“Suit yourself.”

George knew this was a stupid and terrible idea. They were probably the only source of entertainment right now. All eyes would be on them. But Clay looked awful, his hands clenched into fists, a muscle in his jaw jumping. And George wanted—needed to say this. It was clawing at his throat, begging to be heard. It didn’t matter if the whole world happened to be a bystander to his affection. Not when he’d be dying soon. The words felt his weakness and seized the moment, ripping their way out of his mouth with their sharp teeth. “I would kiss you if there weren’t cameras there.”

Clay sat up. “What?”

“Forget I said anything,” George mumbled, his cheeks heating up. His whole family heard that. Everyone in District Three. His classmates, his teachers, his younger brothers, everyone. That was embarrassing. It redefined embarrassing.

“No, I want you to say it again.” George turned to Clay. His eyes were pleading. They bore thousands of tiny holes in George’s face. Like acid. Dousing his face in acid didn’t seem to bad right about now. Gamemakers, listen up while you have the chance!

“What if I just did it?” he asked. Maybe the challenge would get Clay to see sense. To back down. If he set the bar too high, then they would return to normalcy. To safety. To their expected roles. Not... whatever they’d become in the arena.

“That’s fine with me.” That wasn’t what he was supposed to say.

“Cool.” George was trembling. This was more terrifying than facing down the Career pack. Or when he was standing on the pedestal waiting for the Games to begin. His first kiss on national television. It was insane. Ridiculous. A laugh bubbled out of his chest before he could help it. Clay blinked at him, a dopey smile settling on his face.

“Am I going to have to wait all day?”

“Maybe.” George shuffled closer before sitting beside Clay. The other boy shifted to face him and closed his eyes. He was so... relaxed. Calm. How could he be calm right now? Had he forgotten?

“This is stupid.”

“This is *chewpid*.” Clay imitated his accent. George scoffed. “Does everyone in District Three sound like that? Honestly, how does anyone take anything seriously?”

“Please shut up.”

“Shut me up, then.” George rolled his eyes, placed a hand on Clay’s cheek, and leaned in.

For a first kiss, this one was pretty insane. They were sitting underneath a mushroom in the middle of hell. Neither of them had showered in a week. Or brushed their teeth. Clay’s mouth tasted a bit like blood. George was sure he didn’t smell that fantastic, either, so he shouldn’t be commenting on that.

But it was nice. His heart fluttered at the contact. If George squeezed his eyes hard enough, he could pretend that they were kissing on the edge of the woods back in District Three. They were far away from this terrible place. They could be normal teenagers.

The other boy brought a hand to his cheek and began stroking rhythmically with his thumb. George put a hand against the other’s chest as though he was at risk of toppling forward. Like he needed an anchor.

When George pulled away, Clay took a while before opening his eyes. “Why’d you stop?”

“I need a minute.”

“Oops.” Clay shot him a cocky smile before rising to a kneeling position and folding his legs underneath him. George bit the inside of his cheek, trying to calm down his racing heart.

“Is it supposed to feel like you’re dying? Not entirely, just a little bit?”

Clay laughed. The sound reminded George of his mother making tea to settle his stomach when he was younger after a nightmare or a bad cold. She would add a spoonful of honey if they had it to make it go down easier. “I’m not sure, honestly.”

George chuckled. The other’s expression didn’t change, though, so he stopped laughing. “Wait, you’re serious?”

“It’s not easy to focus on romance when you’re spending your whole life preparing for the Games.”

“Hey, you’re not supposed to admit that.”

“We’re not supposed to admit a lot of things. We’re definitely not supposed to kiss each other.”

“Touché, I guess.”

The silence that followed was awkward-adjacent. Words were boiling under George’s skin. Clay broke it first by asking, “Does your family know you’re gay?”

“Now they do.”

“How do you think they’re taking it?”

George shrugged. “Not sure. Hopefully well. They’re not pleased it’s another tribute, though. Sorry, Mom and Dad.” Clay chuckled and grabbed his hand once more to squeeze it. He didn’t let go. The warmth and the weight comforted George. “What about you?”

“They knew I was bi. But like you said, I don’t think they were expecting me to fall for another

tribute. What are the odds of that, huh?"

"It's crazy. I know it's crazy. But I feel like you're the only person I can trust. Is that stupid? It probably is, isn't it?"

"No. I trust you, too. I'm not going to hurt you. I promise."

"That's a tough promise. Considering where we are." Clay's eyes turned fierce. He turned to George and grabbed his face.

"I mean it. I refuse to. I won't. I'm not going to be a little pawn in their Games anymore. Literally and figuratively."

"Okay."

A heavy silence.

When the silence became deafening, George added, "I'm not going to hurt you either."

They spent the rest of the evening talking in low tones about what life was like in their respective Districts. Clay spoke enthusiastically about the ocean, about how wonderful swimming could be. George tried to picture it; the only body of water he had ever seen was the lake inside the arena. "I'll teach you sometime," Clay said, and there it was again, the idea that they might both make it out alive. The stupid, idiotic, hopeless idea.

George loved it tenderly. Cradled it close to his chest. Allowed it to blossom. To fester.

George talked about his family. His two younger brothers, who definitely made exaggerated gagging faces when they had seen the kiss. About working long hours in the factory, tinkering with inventions, and coming up with blueprints. He showed Clay his battery necklace.

"You're smart," Clay said. George looked down, his face flushing. "You are! I mean it!"

"We'll see about that."

They heard the anthem start playing and they looked up at the sky to watch the tributes flash by. It was only one today; the guy from District Seven. George swallowed and looked away. He hadn't caused his death, but he felt responsible.

"How are you okay? With killing them?"

Clay looked at him. His features looked so soft in the moonlight. "I have to be."

It became quiet once more.

George tried to respect the stillness, he really did, but he had another question and he couldn't bear to let it go unspoken. "Why me?"

"You know if I had any say in this at all, I wouldn't have fallen for you. You'd be dead. You would've been dead before the muttations found us." And it was the way he said the words, so emotionless, so flat, that brought George back to reality. "But... you were kind. For no reason. You were so kind it nearly got yourself killed. No one... Kindness isn't a trait that will get you far. Not in a place like this. And yet you're still kind. That's why."

At that moment, a silver parachute tumbled from the sky. George reached up to catch it. Inside were machinery parts and a baker's dozen of bread. Nestled inside was a note.

This is quite the strategy. Enjoy the bread. -T

George blinked at the note. There had to be a hidden message. Something more to this. Techno wouldn't have included a note without a reason.

He showed the note to Clay. He shrugged. "I'm not sure what's so special about this. I mean, he's making fun of you, that much is obvious. But it seems like he's just wishing you well."

A lump formed in George's throat as he handled it. It was bite-sized squares from home that he was used to. The Capitol version, though, so they were fresh and doughy. He wondered what his family was thinking. Were they cursing him for being so stupid? For allowing love to mess with his brain? For throwing away his chances at winning for a fleeting romance that would end in bloodshed?

"I can take first watch, George. You should rest. Let those gears in your brain take a break."

"Alright." George succumbed to sleep faster than he liked to admit. Before it took him completely, though, he noticed Clay stroking his hair.

When he opened his eyes again, it was barely getting light outside. "Did anyone die?"

"Nine's girl and Ten's boy."

"Only three left, huh?"

"They're really running through us." And as though he hadn't said something incredibly morbid, Clay got into his sleeping bag and shut his eyes. Just like that. George smiled and tried not to think too hard.

Only three others left. Three more until one of them would have to die. And George wasn't keen on death, but he wasn't keen on killing the boy he... cared deeply for, either. Against all odds, he cared for Clay. Maybe the Capitol would make an exception.

He snorted. *Yeah, right.*

*

A few hours later, George noticed a whooshing sound. He climbed up from their haven to investigate.

A giant wave was crashing towards them. It was so large that it could be seen even from half a mile away. The Gamemakers were trying to push them together for a conflict. It was effective, if unoriginal.

He ran back to Clay and shook him awake. "We need to go. Tsunami's approaching." Good thing most of their stuff was already packed up. They grabbed their sleeping bags and began jogging.

"Where do they want us to go?" Clay asked.

"Probably to the Cornucopia. That's where the desert is, right?"

"I have a feeling some sand won't be enough to stop this." Come to think of it, Clay had a point. But the Cornucopia was the most logical place to go, wasn't it? After all, it was the center of all the action.

It took about two hours of constant movement to get close enough to the horn. They were slow-

going since George's ankle had yet to heal properly from the explosion. The wave had nearly caught up to them at that point. Its crashing was so loud that George had half a mind to rip off his ears. Clay was grunting from the exertion. Still, they couldn't give up.

They were the first to reach the Cornucopia. The moment they reached the top, there was the boom of a cannon. Who had died? There was no one visible nearby. Perhaps the wave had swallowed someone up. They'd find out who soon enough.

Half an hour later, the girl from District Eleven emerged from the woodlands. She spotted George and Clay immediately and made a beeline for them. George gripped his ax. Now he'd finally see what she was capable of.

Barely thirty seconds after, the girl from District Six crested the hill. George frowned. How was she still alive? She was so scrawny. Everyone must have forgotten about her. She had hidden in the woods or something. She was clutching a spear with all her might. George flattened himself against the Cornucopia, feeling torn. He didn't want to watch her die, but at the same time, he couldn't afford to turn a deaf ear on this world. He needed to be aware of everything.

The District Eleven girl had stopped her advance on him and Clay and turned to focus on the easier competition. She broke into a run and pointed her spiked mace directly at the other girl.

George's eyes went wide as he saw the spear go through her neck. Eleven crumpled to the ground. Clay sucked in a breath when the cannon sounded.

"Holy fucking shit," Clay breathed, grabbing onto George's elbow.

"That's one way to put it."

"Okay, we've got Miss Crazy over there." Six was in the process of picking up the mace and swinging it around, her expression gleeful. "Two on one. Can't be that bad. Is there anyone else?"

"No, just us three."

Six clapped her hands together. "Hello, boys! Come to finish me off?"

"S'pose so," Clay said.

"Let me just make it easier for you." She ran to the Cornucopia. Clay frowned but didn't move.

"Why aren't you going to kill her?"

"I will. But we have the high ground. I can kill her easily when she reaches us." The moment she reached the Cornucopia, Clay moved to a defensive stance. What they didn't anticipate was Gamemaker intervention. The moment she scaled to the top, it started to pour furiously. The wave finally crashed into the Cornucopia, turning the ground beneath them into a deadly ocean. It sent all of them tumbling.

They lost their advantage. Six had reached the top by the time they recovered. She brought her mace down, but Clay dodged to the side before slashing at her with his sword. She backed up and rolled, ending up next to George. He raised his ax, but he was too slow. Her spear entered his stomach.

He fell to his knees. The spear was pulled back out. He felt every movement with disturbing clarity. The pain felt like an internal explosion. Clay yelled something that he couldn't quite hear. His vision went black as he tried to hold back a scream of pain. The clanging of the sword and the

mace sounded miles away.

He swiped feebly in her direction, trying to help, not knowing how. Six smirked at him in the middle of deflecting Clay's sword onslaught. "Oh, did I forget to finish you off? Silly me. Let me deal with your friend first and then I'll get to you."

George bit down on his lip so hard that he drew blood. He crawled forward. Clay couldn't beat her without outsmarting her or overpowering her. Overpowering seemed unlikely. And outsmarting would require...

He dragged himself forward with his arms, willing his guts to stay inside of him. It was getting hard to breathe. With all of his strength, he swung his ax in a clean sweep across the ground, hitting her feet out from underneath her.

She hit the ground. Six turned to him, her expression somehow neutral, even when faced with certain death. Before she could taunt him further, Clay drove his sword into her chest. She gurgled before falling to the ground, her eyes blank. The sound of the cannon shook him to his core.

Clay offered him a hand and he accepted. It took both of their combined strength to get George back on his feet.

"I didn't want it to come to us two," Clay admitted, his sword in his hand. The tip was pointed at the ground, but he hadn't disarmed himself. George's ax was on the ground. He didn't even have the strength to lift it. He had his dagger in his back pocket, but its reach was nothing compared to the deadly sword. By the time he managed to reach it, he would be dismembered. Not like George could ever bear to use it against Clay. "I thought..."

George understood. "I thought I'd die before now."

"Is there any way? We could both live?"

George took Clay's free hand in his own. "Somewhere. There's a place where we're together."

"Yeah? What's it like?"

"We..." Blood was starting to choke him. He spat it out. "There's no Hunger Games there. There's no violence. We're just stupid kids."

"I bet I kiss you first in that universe," Clay said, cracking a crooked smile. "Instead of waiting for you." The sight made George smile, too, despite everything. Despite the metal taste in his mouth. Despite the blood that was pouring from his wound. Despite the floods raging beneath them. George reached for the dagger.

"I can't wait to find out."

Clay's eyes went wide. George leaned in and kissed him, touching his jaw with one hand. The other grabbed the dagger. He pulled back and shoved Clay, who stumbled back a few steps before steadying himself. With his left hand, George held the dagger to his own throat and ripped it open. Blood splattered across Clay's face, who was reaching out, his fingers grazing George's chest. "No, no, no—"

"I love you." He allowed himself to fall back into the raging ocean.

His hearing went first. In the moments as he was falling, descending into the uninterrupted nothingness, he heard Clay and then he couldn't. He shut his eyes, not wanting to watch the world

go dark around him. That would be too much. He wanted a gentle descent.

He crashed into the water, his hands facing the sky. Another crash followed. He hardly felt the second impact. The reverberations bounced off of him faintly. Everything was slipping away. He wasn't afraid. There was nothing left to fear. The universe was finally showing him mercy.

At long last.

He was at peace.

*

George opened his eyes.

It was too bright. He winced and moved to cover his eyes, but his hand was weighed down. He frowned at it. Wires were snaking up the length of his arm, leading to various injection sites. A band connected his right wrist to his bed. Hospital bed. He was in the hospital.

No, he wasn't. He was in the Games still. It was a trick.

Luckily for George, they'd forgotten which hand was dominant and only tied down his right hand. He ripped out as many of the wires as he could, gritting his teeth from the pain. They were making him into a human bomb. As payback for everything he did to his fellow Tributes. A final way to mock him. They'd allowed him to live for this sick joke. It made sense now.

A monitor next to his bed started beeping. He punched it, ignoring the pain that flared in his knuckles. It didn't make it shut up, but it felt good. When he stood up, spots danced in the corners of his vision. There was a click of a door and then he fell back into the bed, his eyes slipping shut.

When he woke up again, the tubes were back in his arm, and now both arms were restrained. They were getting smarter. There was a dark-skinned woman seated next to his bed shuffling through papers. She had exquisite glasses with golden frames. One of the monitors pinged and she looked up.

"George Davidson. A pleasure."

"Hi. Nice to meet you. How am I alive?"

She chuckled. "A fair question. We rescued you from the Games."

"Who's we?"

"You're not going to like the answer."

An intense feeling of vertigo gripped him as he was faced with the reality he feared. He reached for her, hoping that maybe she would take pity on him. "Don't put me back in the Games. I can't go against him. Please. I can't hurt Clay, I promised I wouldn't, please."

She blinked at him, her golden eyes wide. She must be a Capitol citizen. A bit underdressed, but no one else would wear colored contacts. "We would never put you back in the Games. George, we took you from the arena. You're not in the Capitol."

"Oh. Am I in District Three? This doesn't look like the hospital." He wouldn't have been able to afford a bed anyway, nevermind an extended stay.

She shook her head slowly. "When I said that you're not going to like the answer, I meant that it

may be confusing, especially considering the traumatic experiences you just endured. You might want to wait until you have a clearer head.”

He bristled at the insinuation that he was weak. “I can handle it.”

She held up her hands. “Alright. We’re in District Thirteen.”

George’s left eye twitched. He let out a chuckle, waiting for the punchline. When her face remained impassive, another laugh escaped him. “There is no District Thirteen. It got blown to bits.”

“It’s a very long story. But only the aboveground part was nuked. Do you really want to get into the specifics of that right now?”

“You’re lying,” he said, her words bouncing around his skull. It felt like his brain was full of cotton. Every thought took twice as long to register, sluggishly chugging through the channels like thick molasses.

“That’s a perfectly natural reaction, and later I can prove I’m not, but for right now, you’ll just have to trust me.” George snorted. “See, you’re giving me a look like that’s not likely, but you trusted another tribute pretty easily in the Games, so I have a feeling you’ll trust me, too.” And she had him there. He had so many questions. He decided to work his way up. He could hear about District Thirteen later. There were more pressing issues.

“What happened?”

“It’s a very long, very complicated story. I’ll give you a shorter version: you cut your jugular vein, so you didn’t bleed out immediately as you had intended. We had a hovercraft that looked very similar to a Capitol one. We rescued you and got you out.”

“Why?”

The woman shrugged. “My job doesn’t involve asking a lot of questions. But… we need you. For some reason.”

“Where’s Clay?”

“The Victor? The Capitol got him.”

“Does he know I’m alive?”

“Do you want him to know?”

“Please.”

The woman nodded and rose to her feet. “I’ll try to get the message through. Try to get some rest, George. You and Clay… you inspired a lot of people to get very, very angry. In all the right ways.”

“Me? How did I do that?” She was already gone. He settled back into the bed and stared at the ceiling. It was perfectly white.

He closed his eyes and pictured Clay’s smile. His face when George had fallen from the Cornucopia into the storm below. How he looked as though someone had plunged a fist into his chest and ripped out his lungs.

This wasn’t the place he had imagined they could go. Where they could fish together, Clay’s sea-

wrinkled hands guiding George's grease-stained fingers. Where they could mumble to each other underneath trees without needing to hold their weapons in white-knuckled grips, ears pricked for the slightest hint of an enemy. Where they could laugh unabashedly, not worried about who would hear them. Where they could kiss without an audience craning their necks to bear witness.

But it would do. All he needed was Clay.

He could wait. He would wait. There were worse things to suffer.

Chapter End Notes

this video was INSANE. we coded it so that i would kiss another tribute and then fall in love with him. anyway, only a small percentage of my viewers have sponsored me.

lol.

couldn't bring myself to kill off George, even if it was the choice that made the most sense. let's just pretend that they sparked a mini-rebellion before katniss' cool one. and after the events of catching fire, they reunite!

thanks for reading. see you around!

edit: i'm accidentally bumping this i'm so sorry but if anyone has Any ideas for the sequel don't hesitate to drop em. i'm drafting one rn, but it's slow-going, so i'd really appreciate your input!!!

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

dream pov moment

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Clay didn't hesitate before jumping in the water after George. The cannon hadn't sounded yet. There was still time. If he was fast enough, he could grab him and haul him to safety.

He'd done this countless times before. There were always accidents back home. His fingers touched the water.

It was dark. Impossibly dark. But Clay could see George's body, sinking. Sinking. His hands were reaching upwards. He had thought that Clay would try to save him. Despite the lack of light, Clay could see the blood pouring from the wound on his throat. Time was running out.

Clay grabbed onto George's wrist. His lungs were burning. Clay wrapped his arms around George's body and started desperately kicking to the surface.

The water had risen. Clay's eyes widened at seeing the Cornucopia half-submerged. George was ridiculously skinny, but he was dead weight. Difficult to lug without help, especially considering how sodden, exhausted, and weak Clay was after fighting in the Games for so long. He was so tired.

A hovercraft was descending. Clay tread water with one hand, kicking as hard as he could, the other hand gripping onto George's collar. Why was there a hovercraft? Those only appeared after a death or to rescue the Victor. He would have heard a cannon. The rain wasn't that loud.

A claw descended and fastened onto George's body. Clay refused to let go. "No. You can't have him. He's mine."

The claw did not listen. It stole George from his grip. He dangled there, lifeless, his eyes tightly shut. He looked pale, blood smeared all over his forehead, dripping slowly from his neck.

"NO!" Clay yelled, reaching for George. George wasn't dead; there had been no cannon. Clay hadn't shown him District Four yet. Or taught him how to swim. Clay hadn't met George's family. There was so much left for them to do together.

George disappeared within the hovercraft. Seconds later, it was invisible. Clay forgot how to swim. He started to sink beneath the waves. He was numb. None of this felt real. How could George be dead? They had only kissed minutes ago. That couldn't be the last one. Clay wouldn't allow it.

There was the sound of the cannon. Clay ignored it. It wasn't right. The cannon always came before the hovercraft. That was standard.

"Ladies and gentlemen. May I present to you Clay Collins, the Victor of the Sixty-Eighth Hunger Games!"

Clay welcomed unconsciousness eagerly. Perhaps things would start to make sense in his dreams.

*

He remembered snatches of what came next. The eerie white of a hospital room. Being injected with a strange substance as a nurse described his condition to someone just out of sight. Someone sitting in the seat next to his bed. They looked a lot like George. But that was impossible. George had been taken from him. They had taken George away from them.

When he woke up, Clay gasped for air, feeling as though he was underwater, struggling to bring George to the surface. He looked around, but he couldn't quite place himself. It felt familiar. Was he on the hovercraft? No, they must have landed and taken him to a real Capitol hospital. Or some other place to recover. They'd fix him up nicely before he was presented to Panem. The bastards.

"Look who finally came to." A voice. A familiar one. Finnick nodded at him. "Nice job, Clay."

"Where am I?"

"Remake Center. You didn't need too much medical intervention, luckily. Tomorrow night is the recap." The bed dipped when his mentor sat down beside him. "So."

Clay clenched his fists. "Don't say anything." He couldn't bear to hear anyone offer condolences. Or tell him about how much he deserved to win. He didn't deserve to win. He didn't deserve any of this. If he had reacted just a bit faster, then maybe George would be where he was instead...

"I just wanted to say..."

"Don't!" Clay yelled, his voice raw. "I don't want to hear it. Get out." When Finnick didn't stir, Clay leaned closer and said in a low growl, "I thought I told you to get the fuck out."

Finnick blinked at him. Clay curled his lip. It was hard to believe they were the same age. His mentor was already famous for his countless lovers, his fervent adoration from the Capitol, his skill with a trident. That was the Finnick that the world knew about. That was the Finnick that his mentor was trying to portray himself as in the hospital room for the newest Victor from District Four. Clay couldn't care less about that Finnick.

"Clay, what—" Clay wanted to rip him to shreds. He barely held himself back from punching Finnick's lights out. He shook from his poorly contained rage.

"Don't make me say it again."

"Okay. I've got the message." His mentor held up his hands and walked out of the room. He hesitated in the doorway for a moment. "Though. I do need to talk to you before the recap. It's important."

"It will wait." Finnick nodded. The door clicked shut behind him. Clay collapsed back into bed. He'd used up all his energy being angry. Now all that was left was an empty feeling in his chest. He shut his eyes, and George was there, smiling at the ground, a bit too shy to make proper eye contact.

Clay lay beside him and reached out a hand. Except it wasn't George anymore. It was Six. Her eyes were open. They would stay open until someone closed them. Blood trickled from her mouth. He felt himself try to scream, but nothing was coming out of his mouth. Why was she here? He'd killed her, he knew it, the cannon had sounded, but it hadn't sounded for George, and he was dead, so maybe she wasn't dead, maybe she would come back for him, maybe, maybe, maybe —

"Clay." A hand on his shoulder. His eyes flew open. Juko had her hand on his shoulder, her now

bright-green eyes wide with concern. She'd gotten a new face tattoo since he'd last seen her. It was some sort of flower. "Are you alright?"

"Right. Sorry." He'd been asleep for... who knew how long. He sighed and moved to stand. Immediately, his head started to spin. Clay blinked rapidly and sat back down. The ground continued to swoop underneath him.

"I suppose I can spritz you up from your bed." Joko frowned at him as she beckoned his prep team back in. They screamed for a solid three minutes when they saw him.

"Oh my goodness, Clay! We're so happy you're here!" she gushed, plucking at his eyebrows. He didn't flinch at the pain. He felt detached from his surroundings. Like he was floating a bit above himself, and the tether was about to snap. "The Games this year were so unlike anything else!"

Because of George. Because George had made them so unpredictable. Because he'd done the most stupid thing possible and fallen in love with someone who couldn't live as long as Clay stayed alive. Because he hadn't been able to save the best thing that had ever happened to him in time.

"I mean, it felt like you actually cared for him, you know? Like it wasn't just some fling. I mean, I should have known better." Clay frowned.

"What do you mean?"

She tutted and plucked another stray hair. He winced. "You remember the ending, don't you? When you pushed George off the Cornucopia?"

Everything started to slip away. That wasn't what happened. Did they not show George's suicide? It would have been the gory climax of the Games. Unless... unless they had seen it as thwarting their rules...

The prep team continued to chatter, but Clay's mind kept whirring at breakneck speed. He needed to figure out what, exactly, had been televised. The Games were live, but there was still the possibility that they'd managed to get just the right camera angle...

About half an hour before he needed to leave, Finnick walked in. "Hey, Clay."

"Tell me everything."

Finnick looked around the room. "Do you fancy some fresh air?" *We can't talk here. Outside should conceal our conversation.*

"Yeah. That might help me get my strength back." *Okay. But I'll need help getting there.*

Finnick offered his arm and shouldered most of Clay's weight as they walked to the stairwell. After a labor-intensive walk, they were on the roof, looking out on the Capitol. Finnick turned away from him.

"They showed George's suicide, but the camera angle makes it look like you did it. They think you're a heartless monster who tricked the poor boy from District Three into loving you. And if you value the lives of your family and everyone you love, you have to go along with this."

Clay felt dizzy. He sat down on the edge of the roof, his head swimming. "I can't."

"Clay, this is not a request. This is a demand. They will do it, you know. They did it to me. They've done it to others. They will not go easy on you because you're the Victor."

“The Games never end,” Clay whispered. He wanted to sink to his knees and wail. He loved George. He would have never betrayed him like that. “Is there any way I can spin it to be better?”

“You can say you didn’t mean to push him that hard. I don’t know. But you cannot let the audience believe for a moment that George killed himself. If they know that, then there will be absolute madness. There will be rebellion in the districts. They’ll think that the districts can work together. That perhaps a revolution is possible.”

“Maybe there should a revolution,” Clay said bitterly.

“Clay. Listen to me.” Clay turned. Finnick was gripping the edge of the roof with all of his might. He continued to stare out at the night sky. “You cannot screw this up. If you want to come home to a family, you cannot fuck this up. Not during the recap. Not during your interview. Got it?”

Clay nodded. Let the real Hunger Games begin, he thought to himself. This is where they’d kill him. Not his body. But his spirit.

*

It rained too often in District Four. Clay had never noticed it before. Had never had a reason to notice it before.

Before any of this happened, before his life turned upside down, before the entirety of Panem hated his guts, he loved the rain. It would brighten his whole day. For most people, it was an inconvenience. Meant that their clothes would stick to them. But for Clay? It was wonderful.

He'd always loved it when it rained when he went swimming as a child. Clay would watch the ripples that formed, transfixed by the patterns. His parents would call him a little fish, considering how well he took to the ocean. He was a natural citizen of District Four.

After everything—after George gave up everything for him—the rain didn't have the same comfort as it used to. The ocean had been tainted, naturally. At least Clay didn't need to earn his keep. Otherwise, he'd be forced to confront the crashing waves, the nets, the sight of George crashing into the water, being not quite fast enough. It stung. It did more than sting. It was crushing, suffocating, made him feel like he was drowning. He avoided the docks at all costs.

Clay didn't know that the rain would change, too. It was as though the Capitol had taken everything from him. Everything that could possibly bring him joy. Whenever it rained, he'd stay inside his little house in Victor's Village. He'd draw the blinds. He would speak to no one, leave the telephone off of its hook. He'd spend the entire time in his bedroom, the covers wrapped around him. He couldn't bear to get up, not even to brush his teeth or eat. Everything felt like too much. Clay lost himself to the memories of that final day with George.

Once the storm passed through, he waited until he was sure that there would be no evidence before he went outside. Even a mere puddle would send him spiraling. He was pathetic.

It was during a particularly awful storm where Clay decided enough was enough. Months ago, one of the local doctors had suggested that he take medicine to help him sleep. Nighttime was always a battle. He stayed awake for as long as possible, dreading the nightmares that would wait for him if he dared shut his eyes. He had a decent stockpile of the medication left over. Clay hated taking them; they knocked him unconscious and usually prevented terrifying dreams, but on the occasions where they failed, the nightmares would be much, much worse.

He swallowed all of the pills and called Finnick. “Hey, man,” he said when his mentor picked up.

“Clay? Are you doing alright?”

“Yeah. Just wanted to thank you for everything.”

“Are... are you sure you're alright? You sound a little off.”

“I've never been better.” He passed out still holding the phone, which was where Finnick found him not more than ten minutes later. His stupid, sentimental mentor kept him alive. What a waste.

Finnick had said that he'd be grateful eventually. When he was in the right mindset. Whatever that meant.

*

George's younger brothers looked so much like him that it hurt to even glance in their direction.

Clay trembled as he took the stage and looked at the families. Emily's mother and younger sister stared him down. They were thin, their faces angular, their eyes pointing daggers of hatred towards him. He hadn't known her that well, but from George's stories, she seemed like a wonderful person. Who had her childhood stolen by the Capitol.

If Emily's family was hard to face, then George's was nearly impossible. His mother wouldn't even make eye contact. The father looked shellshocked. Like he had only found out that his son was dead moments ago and was now forced to reckon with his killer. His younger brothers were fidgeting. They were too skinny. Clay wanted to vomit. He didn't deserve to win. He didn't need the money. This wasn't right. This wasn't how the Games should have ended.

He glanced down at his notecards, but his eyes were swimming with tears that threatened to spill over. If he wiped them away now, it would draw unnecessary attention to his emotions, and that was the one thing he couldn't do. “Thank you for hosting me,” Clay said, his voice cracking in the middle. “Your hospitality and kindness are... more than I deserve.” He went off-script. He couldn't bear to say what had been drafted for him. It sounded monstrous.

Murmurs from the crowd. There weren't any smiling faces. But their posture changed slightly. Opened up, as though they were letting his words register properly. “I didn't know Emily personally, but from what I heard from...” He bit his lip. “From George, she sounded like a wonderful person. And I'm so sorry for your loss.”

Her mother raised her chin. She wasn't impressed. Clay understood. He had to do better than that. He turned his attention to George's family and screwed up his courage as best he could.

“But I know who I really should be apologizing to. I... I think about that final day in the arena constantly. I can never get it out of my mind, to be honest. It haunts me. It will forever be my greatest mistake.” Tears were trickling down his face. He felt hollow. He was making all the wrong moves. But he had to. It was for the greater good. It was what George would have wanted. “If only I had grabbed him in time. If only it had been me instead. I didn't mean to betray him. And I will live with that for the rest of my life.”

He stepped away from the microphone. Clay waved goodbye before turning his back on the crowd. His shoulders started to shake. He didn't even care if he was out of sight when it happened. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered.

Maybe the Capitol would kill him before he could cause more damage. Then he'd be with George again. That would be...

“Clay.” Finnick grabbed him. “Clay, that’s—”

“I don’t fucking care.”

“Clay, do you know what—”

“Finnick, give me something to live for. Name one reason. C’mon. I dare you.” Clay felt himself slipping. He steadied himself against a wall backstage. It was so hard to keep himself upright. It took so much out of him. “Do it! Can you? I bet you can’t. You could say for my family, sure, but I’m a stranger to them. They think I’m a fucking... monster. They think I killed him. My own family can’t stand me.”

“Listen to me.”

“No. You listen to me.” Clay gathered himself and drew himself up to his full height. He didn’t tower over Finnick, sure, but he had a slight edge. And he was deranged. That helped. “You don’t understand. You don’t understand shit. You’re beloved. The whole world wants to be in your bed. Me? They keep me at arm’s length. I killed their favorite son. The geeky kid that you root for against all odds. Who hated killing. I...”

Finnick punched him. Clay fell back, pain blossoming from his nose. He was more surprised than hurt. His mentor stood over him, fist reared, ready to strike again. “Clay. Please. Just let me talk.”

For once, Clay knew to shut up. Finnick sighed and offered him a hand up. When their fingers met, he felt something press into his palm. “What—”

“You need to get some sleep. And maybe a bite to eat. You’ve got to collect yourself before dinner tonight.” Finnick walked away, shoulders hunched.

Clay opened his hand. Finnick had given him... a cracker? He narrowed his eyes. The number three was stamped in the center, bracketed by two words.

He lives.

*

Two simple words that would change his life forever. Clay had so many questions, but he didn’t know where to start. How did he know this was real? How could he believe a little message from a cracker? It didn’t answer any questions, provide any proof. It could have easily been fabricated.

That was what rational Clay thought about. Irrational Clay felt free for the first time in his entire life.

The Victory Tour became the least of his worries. He read from the cards, acknowledged the families, went through the motions, feeling light for the first time in years. He had something to live for.

Finnick kept a close eye on him and refused to talk any further about the mysterious message, though it didn’t take too much thinking to know what it meant. Why would Finnick lie to him or give him false hope? He was one of the few people who knew the truth about what had really happened during his Games. He knew how that information nearly destroyed Clay. The rumors that had been circulating... they were true, after all.

George’s death had become a conspiracy after the Sixty-Eighth Hunger Games. Since the cannon didn’t sound until after George had been recovered by a hovercraft, a handful thought that

somehow, George had been rescued to contribute to the rebel cause. They were the same people who believed that his death had been a suicide, judging from how Clay dove in after. The Capitol tried to pass that off as Clay falling in from exhaustion, but a scarce few who saw the live cut noticed his expression and his body language didn't make sense with the government's story. But it didn't make sense at the time. Who would have the manpower and the resources to infiltrate the Games? The Capitol controlled all of the wealth. They had all the cards.

Some thought that District Thirteen was the answer. That they weren't just graphite miners; they were in charge of nuclear development, and they had survived after the bombing. That explanation had never made sense to Clay. It had only given him hope, which was a stupid and dangerous thing to have these days. But after the message, the damned thing kept whispering in his ear, redirecting his thoughts, making him feel alive. Like there was something to live for.

When Clay returned home, he discovered that his parents had disappeared in the middle of the Tour, leaving his twelve-year-old sister as his last remaining family member. There were whispers in the streets that Peacekeepers had taken them away. No one told him anything directly, of course; he was still the disgusting bastard who betrayed the boy who loved him.

He walked around the empty house feeling numb, touching all the things that his parents had left behind. His father's fishing boots, bright, yellow, and worn in at the soles. His mother's star necklace that had been her sister's token in the Games. He came from a family of tributes and Victors. His parents had told him how it was an honor that he had been selected for the Games that year. They didn't imagine the dishonor that he would bring upon them.

Clay couldn't muster any tears. The sinking, soggy feeling of emptiness was creeping into his lungs, settling over his chest. Lily wouldn't look at him when he came home. He knew what she was thinking. *This is your fault. You can never fix this.* He would never be able to convince her otherwise. Not if he wanted her to survive.

*

When the Quarter Quell was announced, Clay didn't go outside for a week. He couldn't bear the idea of being sent back into that awful place. He wouldn't be strong enough to survive another stint in there. It didn't help that he knew that people would want his name to be drawn. They wanted him dead. They had wanted Goerge to win in the first place, hadn't they?

His name wasn't picked. Finnick's was, poor Finnick who was already so close to falling apart. And Mags volunteered. Clay hadn't worked too closely with her in the past, but she was kind if a bit hard to understand. Always smiling at him. It was like she had no idea what he had done. What everyone thought he had done.

It was still difficult to disentangle reality from what he used to think. Clay had thought that George was dead for so long. Reconciling that with the truth—that he was alive, the one person who really understood him was alive—was a hard task, even after all these years had passed.

Clay would be Finnick's mentor this time around. Ironically, his tribute had advice for him. "You have to meet with Haymitch. And Techno—he's the mentor for District Three's tributes. They'll explain everything, I promise."

"Those are the people you want to make alliances with? I mean, I get Katniss and Peeta, but District Three? Really?" With the exception of Techno, who'd earned the nickname 'Blood God' for establishing the record for killing the most tributes during his Games, District Three tended to be picked off early on by the Careers. That's why George had surprised him. He refused to be easy pickings.

“Trust me. And them.” Finnick had leaned in close. “We’re getting you closer to George.”

*

The arena shattered into thousands of pieces. Clay watched as it all burned to the ground before the screen went black.

And then Techno’s voice buzzed in his ear from the little device that all mentors used to coordinate sponsorships. Techno had personally designed the earpieces for the members of the alliance to prevent Capitol interference. “Clay. You need to get out.”

He was weightless. He was floating a few inches off the ground. If he wasn’t careful, he might drift through a window and into the sky. Never to return. That explosion couldn’t be real. There was no way to thwart the Capitol. “Clay? Are you there? You need to leave. Right now.”

“Leave where?” His feet moved as his mind chugged at a snail-like pace. Clay went through the motions of packing a backpack. He trusted Techno’s words, even if he wasn’t able to process them entirely. Maybe it was finally time to confirm whether or not George was alive. He wasn’t ready to confront that. He never would be. “Where am I going?”

“Peacekeepers have just been ordered to kill any living Victors. You’re going to make your way to Thirteen.”

“Oh.” He could never really escape the constant fear of death. Not as long as the Capitol existed. They always had the upper hand. They were always ready to take everything from him. “Will they let me in?”

“They better, seeing as I’m half the reason they got their Mockingjay in the first place.” Those words didn’t make sense. Clay had long stopped asking questions. He just accepted things for as they were. “You’ve got five minutes to escape into the woods before they kill you.”

“Okay.” He had a bag packed in one. He found Lily thirty seconds later, perched on the couch. “Lily.” She didn’t respond to him. She usually didn’t. “Lily, I’m going.”

“Have fun with that.”

“I want you to come with me.” She turned her icy glare on him. It was unnerving to make eye contact with her. Techno was counting down in his ear, reminding him of how much time he had left. Clay needed to save his sister. He needed to properly save one thing.

“I’m okay, thanks.” She straightened out the hem of her skirt. “See you later.”

“I won’t see you again if you don’t come with me.” Clay waited a moment. Allowed his words to sink in. Lily’s face remained impassive. “Possibly ever.”

“I’ll take my chances with that.” She pointed her chin up, her gaze flinty. Clay winced. Techno’s voice was growing louder. He headed towards the door, his bag slung over one shoulder. Just before his foot crossed the threshold, he stopped and looked back. She was so small, her shoulders hunched over. This wasn’t right. Their parents should have been there. It was all his fault and he still couldn’t fix it.

“Love you, Lily.” She didn’t respond.

Clay took off at a jog and headed for the fence, the only way out of the district. Other than the ocean, of course, but he couldn’t outswim a boat. In the forest, he could hide out for a little bit

before he was captured and tortured. With a knife he'd stashed, he cut some of the chain-link open, just enough to form a hole to wriggle through. It was weird that it wasn't electrified, but he decided not to dwell on it. Take the universe's occasional blessings as they came.

When he was deep in the woods, there was a beep from his ear. He'd almost forgotten that Techno was watching his every move. "Stay where you are. We're coming to get you."

Clay slumped against a tree. He was still in the Games. Or back in the Games. The distinction didn't matter; the environment, the energy in the air, they were the same. The constant threat of danger. The Capitol breathing down his neck. Never knowing who to trust.

It started to rain. He curled his knees up to his chin and wrapped his arms around himself. He was hardly the image of a Victor, a representation of the strongest and bravest of the districts. He was a pitiful child terrified of thunderstorms who wanted to go wake up his parents after a nightmare. Except the nightmare was real.

The hovercraft shimmered into existence out of nowhere. Clay gaped at it, trying to ignore how similar it looked to the one that took George. A ladder descended. He scrambled up with all of his might.

Techno nodded at him. "Welcome aboard, kid." There were others that Clay didn't recognize, all dressed in plain, gray clothes. Techno fiddled with an object on his wrist as they flew away. It kept beeping throughout their journey.

Clay didn't remember falling asleep, but he must've since Techno was pushing at his shoulder none too gently and it jerked him awake. "You'll want to be conscious for the next bit. Trust me on this one."

He blinked at his surroundings once they exited the hovercraft. They were barren, similar to what the Capitol had always broadcasted, except for a few guard towers. That was the only hint of what might be lurking under the surface.

An elevator shot them deep underground. Someone walked him through the necessary paperwork. Before he knew it, he was a citizen of District Thirteen, registered with an identification number and his living quarters. Techno was waiting for him when he walked out of the room.

"I don't think George knows you're here. He doesn't know any of what's happened, probably. According to Plutarch, they've been using his brains to help with the war effort. He'll be psyched to know that Beetee's here, I'm sure."

"Beetee? They're alive?"

"The tributes from the Quarter Quell are alive, yes. Some are here. Some are there." Clay didn't want to think about where *there* was and what that entailed. "And District Twelve is here, too."

"What? Why?"

Techno shrugged. "Capitol bombed them. That's why." It was scary, listening to Techno describe the fallout with such a detached, nonchalant voice. It was even scarier how quickly Clay got used to it. How easy it was to be unemotional. That must be how Techno coped. Not with a bottle or with morphling, but by distancing himself.

Clay asked, "Can I go see him now?"

"I'll go figure out where he is. You wait here." Techno flagged down some harried-looking

official. She crossed her arms and nodded along as she spoke, occasionally sending Clay pitying looks. He didn't mind. He hadn't been pitied for a long time.

What followed was a blur of hallways and elevators that looked the same, all leading him deeper into the compound that formed District Thirteen. It seemed like they had space for everything. It was mind-boggling.

Finally, finally, Clay was getting swiped into a military design room. It was a fairly large space with desks littered with paper, blueprints, and machinery parts. There was only one person in the room at the moment, a man with jet-black hair messing with a hologram. If it weren't for his bandana keeping his long hair tucked away, he probably wouldn't have been able to see Clay's entrance. He snapped his head up and grinned cheerfully. "Hey! What are you here for?"

"I'm..." Words failed him now that he was so close to what had seemed unattainable. Clay swallowed and formed his hands into fists. He would be strong. He had to be. "I'm here to see George. Do you... do you know where he is?"

The stranger from District Thirteen stared at him for a moment, looking him up and down. "Are you Clay?"

"Yeah."

The other man's eyes nearly popped out of his head. He cupped a hand to his mouth and yelled, "GEORGE! GET OVER HERE!"

There was a distant groan. "What do you want now, Nick?" That voice was familiar. Painfully so. Clay's knees wobbled. He gripped a table for support.

"GET YOUR SCRAWNY ASS OVER HERE! IT'S IMPORTANT!" Nick wore a shit-eating grin. "I'll leave you lovebirds to it, huh?" With that, he walked out of the room.

Someone turned the corner. "Dude, you could've come to me, you know..." George's words died in his throat. Clay gasped, his eyes filling with tears. It was his George. He had an ink stain on his cheek and his hair was a little longer, a little messier, but it was him. "Clay?"

"George?" Clay couldn't move. His feet were rooted to the floor. "Is this real?"

George crashed into Clay and wrapped his arms around him. Someone was crying—maybe they both were. "Yeah, it's real, I'm real, I can't believe you're here, I thought—"

"I thought you were dead," they said at the same time. Clay started stroking George's hair. "I thought you had actually killed yourself, George."

"I thought I had too!" he said, his laughter wet. "But I didn't. I was here."

"You were here," Clay echoed, linking their fingers together. "You were here with me this whole time and I had no idea."

"I'll always be here," George murmured. Clay moved his hand to his cheek, wiping away the tears. "I'm not leaving you again."

Clay touched his forehead to George's. "I'm not leaving you, either. I promise." He tilted George's chin up and brought their lips together. Relief crashed down on him, so strong it nearly swept his legs away. He hadn't been loved for so long.

“I’ve got you,” George kept saying against his lips, kissing him in between the words. “I’ve got you, Clay, I’ve got you, I’m right here.” Clay couldn’t respond. He tried to return the sentiment by holding George as tightly as he could.

“Stay with me?” George asked, looking up at Clay underneath his lashes. They were damp with tears. Clay nodded furiously. “We can share a compartment. I’m sure they’ll allow that even if we’re not married.” George pulled a face. “Clay, you have no idea what it’s like here. It’s so weird. All the refugees from the districts agree—it’s a crazy place.”

“It’s got you,” Clay mumbled, running his thumb over George’s fingers. “So it must be paradise.”

George smiled at him, brighter than the sun. “S’pose I can get used to it now that you’re here.”

For now, at least, the Games were over.

They had won. Together.

Chapter End Notes

didn't think that many people wanted an update lmao!!!!!! here u go i hope u liked it!

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!